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ABSTRACT

This brief report summarizes results of two British national conferences to allow classroom learning supporters to provide their perspectives of inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. The report focuses on the participating learning supporters' recommendations for developing their work and their suggested next steps. The recommendations address the following areas: (1) training and qualifications; (2) pay and conditions; (3) working with children and young people with high levels of support needs; and (4) working with teachers. Sample comments of participants on each of these issues are provided along with the specific recommendations. Three brief extracts from conference presentations discuss the focus on inclusion, the learning supporters' "bind" (between needing professional recognition and commitment to particular students), and research findings (showing the increased use of supporters, the ratio of learning supporters to pupils, the stability of the supporter work force, and the low average pay of supporters. Specific next steps for learning supporters in furthering their goals are listed. The report also lists key conference contributors and workshop facilitators. (DB)

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Learning supporters and inclusion next steps forward

ED 470 517

Report of national conferences in London and Manchester

by Sharon Rustemier with Linda Shaw for CSIE

Introduction

In June 2001, the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE) organised two national conferences in London (June 18) and Manchester (June 21) with the aim of providing a platform for learning supporters' views on their work. Numbers of additional adults working alongside teachers in classrooms have increased rapidly in recent years and many pupils have relied on these extra support staff to secure or retain their place in mainstream education, rather than being segregated in separate special schools. Through the conferences, CSIE sought to promote understanding and appreciation of the work of learning supporters. In particular, the Centre wanted to provide opportunities for discussion about further developments to make the most of supporters' vital contribution to inclusion, concentrating on their perspective.

The conferences followed an earlier report by Linda Shaw for CSIE on learning supporters' work and the concerns and challenges they faced in working towards better schools for all. The report, published in March 2001, and available from CSIE, also identified an agenda of issues which supporters felt needed addressing if their work was to be most effective. Priorities for development included pay, conditions, working with teachers, working with pupils with high level support needs, training and qualifications.

This earlier report *Learning supporters and inclusion – roles, rewards, concerns and challenges* provided the background for discussion at the two national conferences. More than 450 people attended, mainly learning supporters, to take part in discussions in workshops and plenary sessions and to hear commentary and research findings on supporters' contribution to inclusion from colleagues and other professionals.

The report which now follows focuses on supporters' recommendations from the two conferences for developing their work as well as suggestions for next steps forward. Some of the recommendations augment or confirm changes already in process; others suggest fresh initiatives. A small selection of edited extracts and quotes from other presentations at the conferences is also included. A full list of key contributors and facilitators is provided at the end of the report.

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Recommendations from the conferences for makin

Training and qualifications

- Training must be specific to primary schools, secondary schools, and colleges.
- National training guidelines are needed to provide a cohesive system which accredits the myriad of training courses around and enables recognition of qualifications between schools and between LEAs.
- Experience as well as training should be recognised and accredited towards qualifications.
- Schools themselves should take some responsibility for training, as they do for teachers.
- The in-service training budget (INSET) should include an allocation for learning supporters.
- Training should include teaching about how to develop creativity and flexibility as well as specific training on subjects such as autism, etc.
- Individual schools should be resourced to share good learning support practice with neighbouring schools.
- Learning supporters should have access to appraisal, performance management and career development opportunities.

Comment

The new National Training and Qualifications Framework for learning supporters which is nearing completion was given a cautious welcome. Learning supporters saw it as making steps towards addressing some but not all of these concerns. For further information about the National Framework contact Jackie Hodson, Local Government National Training Organisation (LGNTO), Layden House, 76-86 Turnmill Street, London EC1M 5LG or see www.lgnto.gov.uk

In addition to the call for formal training, learning supporters recognised the importance of learning from individual young

'It's ironic that a group of people who themselves feel excluded and unrecognised – the learning supporters – are the ones trying to help disabled and other previously excluded young people to be included in mainstream education and society. It's really difficult to understand how this situation has happened without recognising the struggle that the world is having with the concept of inclusion.' (Micheline Mason)

Pay and conditions

- There should be a national pay structure.
- There should be a defined career structure with clear job descriptions.
- Pay should be linked to qualifications and responsibilities.
- Learning supporters should be paid for time spent in training and appropriate cover arranged to enable their release from school for training.
- Pay should be salaried, not on a pro rata basis.
- Government should allocate more funding specifically for learning supporters in schools.
- LEAs should establish networks for learning supporters, and improve those that already exist.
- Supporters should be employed on permanent, not temporary, contracts.
- Learning supporters should be given professional status on a par with teachers.
- The shortage of male learning supporters should be addressed (*eg* by improving pay and conditions).

Comment

Learning supporters felt that government delegation of decisions about pay and conditions allows huge variations between Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and even between schools. Change at a local level risks encouraging 'leapfrogging' where supporters move to schools which offer the best pay and conditions.

'Increasingly income, class, gender, race, ethnicity, disability and first language have become illegitimate as reasons for exclusion from learning. Segregated education is losing its credibility.' (John O'Brien)

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g the most of supporters' contribution to inclusion

Working with children and young people with high level support needs

- The involvement of parents in this provision should be encouraged and their contributions appreciated.
- Many young people would benefit from having a dedicated personal assistant who is distinct from the learning supporter – the roles are different.
- Young people should be involved in choosing and training those who work closely with them, especially their personal assistants.
- More attention should be paid to issues of staff protection, health and safety and the administration of medical treatments.
- Learning supporters need their own personal development plans and opportunities for creative discussions with line management.
- Provision should be made to cover for the unavailability of a young person's main supporter.

Comment

Learning supporters were highly aware of the tensions between wanting to foster young people's independence while at the same time recognising that often one supporter must be trained specifically to work with a particular student, eg in learning his or her method of communication.

The Alliance for Inclusive Education has worked with young people with high level support needs to produce a Charter for Inclusion Assistants. See 'The Inclusion Assistant – Helping young disabled people with high level support needs in mainstream education', report and video available from the Alliance for Inclusive Education, Unit 2, 70, South Lambeth Road, London SW8 1RL, £10 including p&p.

> *'Inclusion is a day to day struggle for justice about practical day to day stuff, like whether you get respectful help to go to the toilet, etc. It calls on learning supporters to speak up to resist prejudices, low expectations and bullying by children and adults, and to work to change policies that are unsustainable.'* (John O'Brien)

Working with teachers

- Learning supporters should be included in every aspect of the school.
- There needs to be much more collaboration, with time built in for planning and evaluation and discussion before class activities.
- Peripatetic supporters should be involved in planning with teachers.
- There should be joint training and training specifically on how teachers and supporters can work as a team.
- The value of learning supporters should be recognised in inclusion policies.
- Young people benefit when teachers recognise learning supporters' ideas and contributions.
- Teachers need to recognise that while learning supporters have a different role than teachers, they are equal as a profession.
- Teachers should take ownership of the educational experiences of the young person and not delegate planning and preparation of work to the learning supporter.
- Working with learning supporters should be addressed in initial teacher training.
- Learning supporters should be involved in all meetings relating to the young person.

Comment

In October 2000 the government produced a guide entitled 'Working with teaching assistants – a good practice guide' which addresses some of these concerns. The guide was aimed at teachers and headteachers and there was little evidence that learning supporters had been made aware of it.

> *'Inclusion is not just a change about how you manage classrooms. It really is a change about why we go to school at all. What is school for? What are we paying the state for if it's not to create a place where we can all live a good life as adults together, and where everybody has a valued role?* (Micheline Mason)

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EXTRACT 1 Focus on inclusion

John O'Brien, an inclusion consultant from Lithonia, Georgia, USA, said schools traditionally aimed to raise standards through the exclusion of certain young people. Inclusionists believed both achievement and inclusion were possible, working towards a goal of '*all are welcome, each belongs and everyone is an active learner*'.

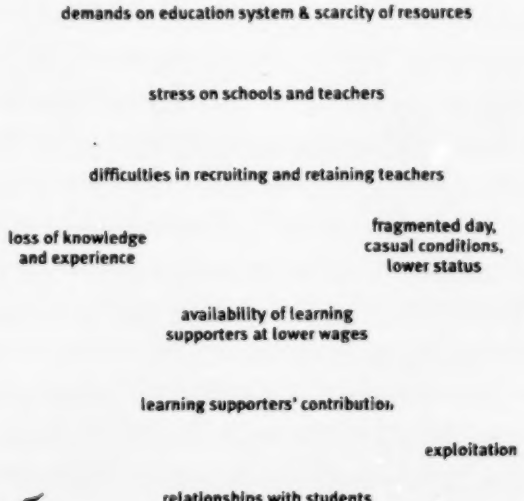
This represented a fundamental change in educational culture and inevitably met resistance.

John O'Brien saw learning supporters as having a critical contribution to make to educational debates about inclusion and the growth of inclusive schools because of what they know about the meaning of schooling and what education really needs to be. He said that effective learning supporters know:

- The fundamental importance of respectful personal relationships between adults and children as a foundation for learning, especially with students that other people have trouble seeing clearly enough to get to know.
- Spending time and sharing everyday tasks – such as going to lessons, lifting, help with eating, adapting the curriculum – are the foundations of relationship.
- There are many ways of being intelligent and many different styles of learning.
- There are possibilities for mutual enjoyment and learning that students bring to each other but that doesn't necessarily happen spontaneously or automatically – adults have an important role in helping children to build responsible relationships with each other, especially when those relationships are across social fracture lines like race, gender and disability.
- The importance of learning from students.
- The power of partnership with parents.
- Disabled adults have much to teach about the sources of exclusion and the meaning of inclusion and about future possibilities for disabled children and youth.

EXTRACT 2 The learning supporters' 'bind'

John O'Brien analysed the situation in which learning supporters find themselves in terms of what he called the learning supporters' 'bind'. The education system faced increasing demands and, together with the scarcity (perceived or real) of resources, this contributed to difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers. According to John O'Brien's interpretation, recruiting learning supporters at lower wages could be seen as a short term solution to this loss of personnel, knowledge and experience. Their availability at lower wages depended in part on continuing to fragment their days, casualise their terms of employment, and not recognise their work as comparable to work that was currently paid professionally. The 'bind', as he saw it, occurred because learning supporters' contribution focused on a commitment to a relationship with particular students which left them open to exploitation (whether intentional or not).


demands on education system & scarcity of resources
stress on schools and teachers
difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers
loss of knowledge and experience
fragmented day, casual conditions, lower status
availability of learning supporters at lower wages
learning supporters' contribution
exploitation
relationships with students

EXTRACT 3 Research findings

Will Swann and Roger Hancock reported the findings of Open University research into the work of learning supporters. The study focused on the work of learning supporters mainly in primary schools in three LEAs in 1999:

- Nationally, between 1995 and 2000 the number of supporters employed in schools, especially primary schools, grew by 48%. This compared with an increase in the numbers of teachers by 1% in primary schools and 2% in secondary schools. Yet papers like the *Times Educational Supplement* continued to devote a disproportionate amount of space to teachers' issues with very little attention to learning supporters. This lack of recognition of such a *'major innovation'* in education was difficult to understand (Roger Hancock).
- The ratio of learning supporters to pupils varies widely across the country, from one supporter for every 37 pupils in the Isle of Wight to one supporter for every 116 pupils in Trafford. The differences in ratios do not relate to the level of need among pupils. Such differences are a possible barrier to consistency in pay and conditions.
- Of the learning supporters surveyed, only 50% were on permanent contracts. Contracts were reviewed annually for 28% of those surveyed and termly for 12%.
- Learning supporters represented a far more stable school resource than teaching staff, with 25% having been at their school for over 10 years.
- Most learning support time is concentrated in the literacy and numeracy hours, with 71% of teachers receiving more than 2 hours per week classroom support for the literacy hour and 52% for the numeracy hour. This compares with only 15% for science and 2% for music.
- Most of those surveyed earned between £4 and £6 per hour. *'You can earn more as a cleaner.'* (Will Swann)
- Learning supporters represent a resource with a wealth of background experience, often hidden and untapped by schools. In this study, such experience included working in offices, shops, the food industry, factories, care settings, social services, and with children generally.

'Learning supporters are the blood transfusion of the educational service'. *(Roger Hancock, quoting Harold Rosen)*

But does this mean

or

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Manchester Conference Video
A video of the Manchester Conference on Learning Supporters and Inclusion is available for £12.99 inc. p&p from Mike Walker, Tapebank Digital Video Productions, 17 Staincliffe Close, Dewsbury, West Yorkshire WF13 4EL. Please send your order with cheque to Mike Walker at this address.

'In a time when we attend very much to the mechanisms and techniques for delivering curriculum, we need to keep remembering that teaching is first and foremost a matter of the development of human beings as moral actors, as citizens, as people who are going to live in, and need to make a difference to, a very diverse and very complex world. And that requires far more than simply the delivery of instruction as marked by test results. It's a matter of the heart as marked by the kind of relationships and the sense of community that develops over time in a school.' (John O'Brien)

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Suggestions for next steps forward

- **Send a report from the conference including supporters' recommendations and suggestions to LEAs, Government and other interested individuals and organisations.**
- **Organise a delegation to see Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education and Skills. To coincide with this, learning supporters can lobby their local MPs.**
- **Learning supporters can use the conference report to press for change.**
- **Learning supporters can approach their school head and/or write to their chair of governors and request an investigation into their pay and conditions.**
- **Learning supporters can ask parents who are supportive to raise concerns about pay and conditions during the annual parent governor meetings.**
- **Learning supporters can pressurise their unions to raise their concerns nationally.**
- **Those supporters who are not currently members of a union can consider joining.**
- **Learning supporters can work on improving relationships with the teachers they work with.**
- **Learning supporters can continue to listen to the views of young people and encourage teachers and others to do the same.**

As part of the conference discussions on developing supporters' work, learning supporters faced their own multiple choice test on next steps forward as follows:

'Learning supporters have the best chance of gaining the conditions they need to make their greatest possible contribution to better schools for all if they ...

a Attend a conference and then go home to wait for government to read the report and do the right thing.

b Gather occasionally in the corner of the staff room to commiserate.

c Get organised with other learning supporters and make their voice heard.

d Organise an alliance with other people working towards inclusion, including other learning supporters, teachers, parents, young people, and disabled adults.'

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Conference key contributors and facilitators

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